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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet provides educators with a consumer's guide to private tutoring services in their communities. It includes a history of the tutoring tradition, methods used by tutoring services to show student progress, procedures for locating a tutor or tutoring service, criteria for selecting a tutoring service, a checklist for assessing tutoring services, suggestions for counseling parents who are considering enrolling their child in a tutoring service, and an annotated bibliography. (PB)

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Educators' Consumer Guide to Private Tutoring Services

Edward E. Gordon

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Educators' Consumer Guide to Private Tutoring Services

by
Edward E. Gordon

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Introduction

Parents often ask teachers, guidance counselors, and principals for information about private after-school tutoring programs. In most instances educators know very little about these programs. They are unlikely to have made an on-site visitation to a tutoring center or to have interviewed the individuals who serve as private tutors.

During the past 20 years I have dealt with 25,000 to 30,000 inquiries from parents and other adults in the Chicago area who are looking for private after-school tutoring. The types of assistance sought vary greatly. They include requests for information on: remedial programs; programs for gifted children; test preparation for the GED, ACT, SAT, GMAT, and GRE; special assistance for students with vision or hearing disabilities; adult basic literacy; preschool learning and reading programs; advanced math and science courses for high school and college students; preparation for professional licensing examinations in law, nursing, medicine, and lab and x-ray technicians; foreign language instruction for both students and adults; home-bound tutoring for seriously ill children; summer school courses for make-up or advanced credits; diagnostic testing for learning disabled or handicapped students; motivation programs for underachievers; special programs for hyperactive, emotionally disturbed, or socially maladjusted children; and even special vocational tutoring in retail buying, executive writing, and speech skills.

Such private tutoring programs are proliferating and in some cases are national franchise operations. They reflect a demand for individualized educational services to supplement what is provided in the schools. And in our affluent society, people are willing to pay for such services. This fastback is an attempt to provide educators with a guide to private tutoring services in their communities. More specifically, it is a consumer's guide, designed to show educators how to assess these private tutoring services. With this information, educators will be better prepared to counsel students and their parents on using these services -- or not using them.

A Brief History of the Tutoring Tradition

Private tutoring has a long tradition dating back to ancient Greece, where Socrates engaged each of his students in speculative dialogues. The tradition continued in the Roman era, when Cicero taught his pupils the principles of rhetoric. In the Middle Ages the monks who preserved the written record of antiquity learned from tutors. Such Italian Renaissance scholars as Veltorino de Feltre, Guarino da Verona, Castiglione, and others first served as tutors at the courts of the Italian city states. The royal families of Europe used tutors to educate their children. And this practice spread first to the nobility, then to the landed gentry, to the rising professional class, and finally to the mercantile middle classes.

Erasmus, Thomas More, Roger Ascham, Thomas Eliott, and others wrote extensive works advocating the use of tutors as an alternative to the substandard schools of their day. John Locke, Francois Fenelon, Jean-Jacques Rosseau, and Maria Edgeworth, among others, regarded home tutoring as the ideal form of educating the individual child.

By 1850 more than 50,000 governesses and male tutors were teaching children in the homes of upper- and middle-class families throughout Great Britain. Queens College, the first college for women in England, was established in 1848 as an institution to prepare women to serve as governesses.

In Colonial America, tutors and governesses were common. As the frontier opened up, itinerant teachers traveled from homestead to homestead for brief periods providing children with instruction in basic literacy on a one-to-one basis. Teachers in the thousands of one-room schools in rural areas practiced a form of tutoring by using older students to tutor the younger ones. The tutoring tradition continues today with teachers who work with home-bound children. In 1987 it was estimated that approximately one million children and adults are tutored annually, receiving educational services valued from $25 million to $500 million.

Today, many types of private tutoring services are available in most communities. The most common type of tutoring is the individual teacher (often retired) who works with children after school at home or in the classroom for an hourly fee. Typically, these teachers function as homework helpers. Some communities now have "Homework Hotlines" staffed by volunteers, who offer assistance on homework assignments over the phone. Some of these hotline programs are sponsored by the PTA; others receive federal funding and are supervised by professional educators. Many communities use trained volunteers as tutors in adult literacy programs conducted at public libraries.

Another type of tutoring service is a group practice of professionals who provide diagnosis and remediation in learning disabilities. The staff of these private agencies usually have a background in special education and testing. Typically they offer testing, counseling, and tutoring services conducted one-to-one or in small groups.

Universities operate another type of tutoring service as part of their graduate programs in learning disabilities and reading. Graduate students working under the supervision of their professors gain clinical experience by testing, diagnosing, and tutoring students. Fees for services provided in these programs are usually on a sliding scale based on family income.

A final category of private tutoring services is the corporate-owned learning center. Many of these are directly owned by a corporation;

others are franchised and are locally owned and operated. Some of these centers make extensive use of computer software programmed learning material. Most tutoring is done in small groups, although one-to-one instruction is sometimes available. The tutors are usually college graduates, but they are not necessarily certified in the subject area they tutor.

The various types of private tutoring services described above may not exist in small communities, but most of them usually can be found in urban areas. Whether conducted by a retired teacher seeking to supplement a meager pension or by a nationally franchised operation with a million-dollar advertising budget, private tutoring continues a historical tradition of personalized instruction to serve a variety of needs.

Why Consumer Information for Private Tutoring Services?

Why should an educator in either a private or public school refer parents to a private tutoring service for their children? The need for tutoring is not an indictment of the school. Such services are not in competition with the school. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that many students, for many different reasons, can profit from the one-to-one personal attention that tutoring can provide. Tutors can analyze a student's learning needs (diagnosis) and can adapt the student's learning experiences (individualization). Tutoring at its best complements the work of the school. The decision to use a tutor may be the most important one a parent can make for a child. Yet most parents have little knowledge about selecting a tutor or a private tutoring service.

To defend against misleading or fraudulent claims, educators need to arm parents with basic consumer information about tutoring services. And they need to have this information *before* a parent requests help. Parents need to know what types of tutoring programs are available in the community and which ones are appropriate to handle their childrens' particular learning needs. They need to learn how to read critically the advertising used by tutoring services and to understand the labels or terminology used.

Very few states regulate private tutoring services with respect to financial practices, advertising claims, guaranteed outcomes, curriculum, tutor qualifications, supervision, or feedback to parents and schools. Nor does the field of private tutoring police itself, as do the

professions of medicine, accounting, and law. Only a handful of tutoring services have sought voluntary accreditation as a "special function school" through the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the largest and oldest voluntary accrediting organization in the country. The potential for consumer fraud is ever present.

One national tutoring franchise goes so far as to guarantee that "your child's reading or math skills will improve by at least one full grade level after just 36 instruction hours" (at a cost of approximately $1,000). If the guarantee is not met, it will provide up to 12 additional hours of instruction at no extra charge. Not a bad deal; for $1,000 (if you can afford it), you can buy a whole year's progress. But read the fine print. The company reserves the right to select the pre- and posttests used to measure the child's progress. And by carefully selecting these tests, the franchise may *appear* to meet its guarantee, even though the child's test scores at school do not show anywhere near that amount of improvement.

Furthermore, the guarantee for reading improvement is fulfilled if the progress occurs in *either* comprehension or vocabulary, not both. The same is true of math when the guarantee is met by improvement in *either* computation or application of math concepts, not both. Parents will be disillusioned when they are told by their child's school that only part of the deficient skills have improved, and then not nearly as much as they were led to believe by a private program's tests and "guaranteed results." Furthermore, this agency has not published any research to verify its advertised claims.

Mrs. Lang's experience with her 12-year-old daughter, Sue, is a far-too-typical example of test grade inflation. Sue's seventh-grade math teacher told Mrs. Lang that Sue was two years below grade level in math. When the teacher suggested that a tutor might help to improve Sue's math skills, Mrs. Lang enrolled Sue at a tutoring center that "guaranteed results."

The center's pretests showed Sue's math skills to be 2½ years below seventh-grade level. After 30 hours of tutoring, a different stan-

dardized test indicated two full years of improvement in Sue's math skills. Mrs. Lang was ecstatic – until Sue failed math the next semester, and her teacher reported that she simply did not see any great improvement either in Sue's class work or test grades.

How could this have happened? Who was wrong – the teacher or the tests? The truth is, neither. What Mrs. Lang never thought to check was whether the tests given by the tutoring center were appropriate for Sue's age group. Test publishers market a variety of standardized tests, which may be too hard or too easy for a particular age group. By giving a difficult pretest and an easier posttest, it is possible for a tutoring center to show marvelous results and meet its "guarantee."

Celebrity endorsements are another popular marketing method used to sell all kinds of products, including tutoring services. Professional athletes, actors, politicians, and even some educators lend their names to "proven remedial programs." Sometimes the celebrity gives a testimonial to the effect that, if this "new proven educational method" had been available to help overcome his or her personal learning disability, how much easier life would have been! Actually, very few of the individuals who endorse such programs are qualified to evaluate their content or quality. Even professional educators endorsing such programs rarely check on how effectively the program serves its clientele. Endorsements may sell cars, clothes, and cosmetics, but they are not a substitute for investigating the facts about a professional educational service.

Other appeals are used that play on parents' emotions. Guilt-ridden parents who feel they have failed their child respond to the copywriter's glowing claims that the tutoring program will ensure "your child's future success." The ads talk vaguely about teaching "the basics," about "programs designed for the individual." They claim that after using their methods a student "performs remarkably better!" Exactly how all this is accomplished is left unsaid.

The ad for one private learning center includes an "Underachievement Profile," consisting of a series of questions for parents to an-

swer about their child. This is followed by the statement, "Remember, most underachievers will deny they have a problem. It is you as parents who must make the decision to seek help." Parents who already feel guilty about their child's failure in school are invited to sign up for the center's motivational counseling program, even though they have little understanding of just what a motivational counseling program can and cannot do to improve daily schoolwork.

Mrs. Roberts contacted such a motivational counseling program for her teenage son, Roger, who his teachers described as having considerable academic potential, which he failed to use. When Mrs. Roberts took Roger to meet Ms. Prentice, a counselor at the motivation center, she was impressed with the friendliness and the insight Ms. Prentice seemed to have regarding Roger's behavior, even though she had only just met him. After paying substantial fees for several weeks of individual and group counseling sessions at the center, Mrs. Roberts had high hopes for improvement in Roger's school work. It was not forthcoming.

The counseling at the motivation center was not coordinated with Roger's teachers at school. Ms. Prentice glossed over his need for intensive remedial work in reading and math skills and assured Mrs. Roberts that these skills would improve once Roger became "motivated" to do his schoolwork. Not only was Roger's weakness in basic skills ignored, but no plan was made to provide him with help in these skills, even though he was now willing to accept such help.

Educators can advise parents in selecting a tutoring service by identifying what specific types of learning problems the service deals with and how it goes about remediating the problem. Educators must help parents to look beyond the hype of promotional literature that touts "state-of-the-art computerized instruction" that will solve any and all learning problems. There are no generic "wonder programs" that can help every student who arrives at the door of a tutoring service. Educators can help parents from becoming victimized by overstated or misleading claims of private tutoring services.

In the following chapters, I shall present criteria for selecting a tutor or tutoring service that matches a student's specific educational needs.

Finding Tutoring Services in the Community

Educators and parents can find information about local private tutoring services from many sources. Many schools maintain an informal list of individuals who do private tutoring. Usually these are persons who are known by the principal or teachers. Some may be full-time teachers who work with children after school. Others are substitute teachers or retired teachers. The school also may have firsthand information on private tutoring agencies from students who have used their services.

The local library is another source of information. The reference sections of libraries commonly have a directory of local social service agencies, including tutoring services. Large metropolitan areas sometimes have a community agency referral service, which people can call for information on local tutoring services. A readily available information source is the Yellow Pages of the phone book, which carries ads or listings of tutoring agencies.

The local Better Business Bureau may be able to supply consumer information on a specific tutoring program. This agency maintains a consumer complaint history on local businesses and will report whether a particular program meets the standards for general business practices.

Although the above information sources can identify tutors or tutoring services in the community, they are unlikely to be able to provide any evaluation of their services. Promotional brochures or

catalogues may provide an overview of the services provided by a tutoring agency. However, even with this printed literature, and especially in the case of individual tutors, it will be necessary to ask several questions to get a complete picture of the services provided. Some pertinent questions to ask are:

1. What is the major purpose of the tutoring agency? What is its philosophy of education?
2. What types of children and adults are served: handicapped, learning disabled, underachievers, emotionally disturbed, gifted, preschool, elementary, secondary, college?
3. In what areas is tutoring offered?
4. What fees are charged? Is a contract required for a certain number of sessions?
5. What are the admission procedures? Is there a formal intake procedure where parents are counseled regarding how the services provided will help their child?
6. Who are the tutors? What are their qualifications? Do they have any supervision?
7. Where is the tutoring conducted: at a center, the child's home, the tutor's home, the local library?
8. When is the tutoring held: after school, weekends, evenings, summer months?
9. How long and how often are the tutoring sessions?
10. Is the tutoring one-to-one or small group?

The answers to these how, what, who, where, when, and why questions are the beginning steps in matching a student's specific needs with an individualized program of tutoring.

A Checklist for Assessing Tutoring Services

Before advising parents to use a tutor or tutoring service, educators must gather as much background data as possible on the student, in order that the services to be provided are appropriate for the student's educational needs. Cumulative records, reports from teachers and guidance counselors, parent interviews, and, in the case of special education students, the Individualized Education Program (I.E.P.) are all useful in developing a student's learning profile. Parents must give written permission if any of this confidential information is to be shared with the tutor. With the student's learning profile in hand, the educator then can review the tutoring options available and help the parent to make a decision.

The checklist below outlines the kinds of information an educator should collect about each local tutoring service. Or the checklist can be given to parents if they want to conduct their own investigation. Some of the information can be found in the promotional materials distributed by tutoring services. Obtaining other information will require an interview or an on-site visit. If the information from the checklist for each tutoring service is kept on file, it can be used when advising other parents in the future.

Tutoring Service Checklist

I. Basic Information

1. How long has the tutoring service been in operation?
2. How many students have been served?

3. Who owns the service?
4. Is the service part of a large corporation? A franchise operation?

II. References

1. Is the service known to local public or private school educators?
2. What do other parents who have used the service have to say?
3. What does the Better Business Bureau know about the service's business practices?
4. What does the Chamber of Commerce know about the business operation?

III. Licensing/Credentials

1. Is the service licensed by the state or accredited by an accrediting agency, such as the North Central Association?
2. What are the educational qualifications of the director/administrator of the service?
3. What percentage of the service's staff are certified as teachers?
4. Are the tutors certified to teach in the subject areas in which they are tutoring?
5. Is the tutoring staff supervised on a regular basis?

IV. Program Content and Goals

1. Do the promotional brochures, catalogues, and other literature describe clearly the program and policies of the tutoring service?
2. Is an attempt made to collect a complete learning profile of the student during the intake procedures?
3. Does the service provide an individual diagnosis of a student's learning needs?
4. Does the service explain specifically what its plan is for individualizing a tutoring program for a student?
5. Is the instructional model primarily one-to-one, small group, computer programs, or a combination of these?
6. Does the service provide a variety of learning resources and testing instruments that are appropriate for a student's educational needs?
7. Does the service offer flexible scheduling that is convenient for students and their parents?

V. Contracts and Guarantees

1. If the tutoring service uses a contract, are the terms spelled out in language that is easily understood by the average parent?
2. If the contract contains a guarantee clause, does it explain what kinds of tests or other evaluation instruments will be used to measure student progress and thus meet the terms of the guarantee?
3. If pre- and posttest scores on standardized tests are used to determine whether the guarantee has been met, will parents be allowed to compare these test results with those given at school and with the students' overall academic progress in school?

VI. Fees

1. Are the fees charged by a tutoring service spelled out in detail at the time when a parent makes a decision to use the service? For example, is the cost per course or cost per hour specified?
2. Is the parent made aware of what the total cost of a typical tutoring program might be before signing a contract?
3. If the student needs additional assistance, is there provision for extending the tutoring at a reasonable fee?
4. If additional fees, not included in the basic tutoring package, are charged for materials or special testing, are parents alerted to this when they sign a contract?
5. What options are there for paying fees? Must they be paid up-front as a single payment or is payment by installments allowed? Will credit cards be accepted?

VII. Reporting Student Progress

1. Does the tutoring service have a plan for reporting student progress in a timely manner both during and after completing the program?
2. Does the plan include reporting to both parents and the student's teacher(s)?
3. What is included in the report and how is it interpreted to parents and the school?
4. Is the tutoring program coordinated with the student's academic work at school? For example, is the tutor willing to attend a staff conference at school to review the report?

5. Is the tutor prepared to make referrals to other professionals if the student needs psychological counseling or other forms of assistance?
6. How long after a student completes the tutoring program can the parent and school expect to receive a written report?
7. Does the tutoring service have a system for storing a student's records for future reference?

VIII. Handling Questions and Complaints

1. If a student's parents or teachers call the tutoring service with a question or complaint, do they have easy access to the tutor or the administrator of the service?
2. Does the service have a refund policy in case a parent decides to cancel the tutoring program?

IX. Providing a Safe Environment

1. If a student's tutoring sessions are held at a center, does the site comply with local/state safety regulations for operating a public facility?
2. Is the center clean and attractively decorated?
3. Are restrooms available? Are they kept clean and stocked with necessary supplies?
4. What procedures does the tutoring service have for screening its staff in order to lessen the possibility of child abuse?

The items of this checklist can serve as a guide when counseling parents who are considering using a tutor or tutoring service for their children. **Note: This checklist may be copied and given to parents without requesting permission of the publisher, the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.**

Counseling the Parent

In order to counsel parents, it is necessary to have up-to-date information about tutoring resources in the community. An effective way to do this is to have a file folder for each tutoring service. In addition to the information collected from the checklist, this folder might contain brochures, catalogues, and newspaper ads from the tutoring service; reports from regulatory or accrediting agencies and the Better Business Bureau; and notes from teachers whose students have used the tutoring service.

With this information in hand, educators can help parents make an informed choice when selecting a tutoring service. Since, in most cases, the parents pay the fee for private tutoring, they have the right to make the final decision on who will tutor their child. But educators also have an investment in the student, so they must take an advocacy role in helping parents to make the best decision for their children.

When counseling parents, it is important that they understand that the school is vitally interested in the outcome of the tutoring. Teachers must share their professional insights about the student with the tutor. In order to do this, parents must give the school permission to release test data and other pertinent information to the tutor. The tutor, in turn, should give teachers feedback on student progress and perhaps make suggestions as to how teachers can help students in their regular classroom work.

It should be made clear to parents that even the best tutoring will not result in academic miracles overnight. Even with the individualized attention tutoring offers, it takes time to remediate deficiencies in basic skills or to develop good study habits. However, teachers are in a position to observe change in skills and work habits in their classroom and can report to parents on how much progress is being made in reaching the objectives established at the outset of the tutoring program. If the student does not seem to be making any progress, a teacher may want to suggest to the parent that tutoring be discontinued or that the student be changed to another tutor.

Using the interim and final reports submitted by the tutor as well as their own professional judgment, teachers can consult with parents and students and work out a program for continued progress in the classroom. Parents should feel that the teacher and tutor are working as a team to serve their child's best interests.

Conclusion

As the director of a private tutoring agency for the past 20 years, I have seen many of these agencies come and go. However, the demand for private tutoring continues, and all signs indicate that it will be an educational option for years to come. Therefore, it behooves us as professionals to become consumer activists in the field of private tutoring services. By asking the hard questions, such as those on the checklist in this fastback, we can raise the standards of private tutoring services and ensure quality education for all students who use these services.

Regulatory and accrediting agencies are already active in the private tutoring field. Educators can help by scrutinizing private tutoring services in their own communities and by providing consumer information to parents. This fastback has provided educators with guidelines for the kinds of consumer information parents need.

Finally, there is a need for research on the tutoring process and the implications it holds for classroom teaching. A foundation of research will help to professionalize the tutoring field.

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